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BEYOND THE SCHOOLROOM GLOBE: Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, South Korea, and West Africa as Substantive Elements of Curriculum Pedagogy and Cultural Understanding

PEER REVIEW: The Case for Hands-on Constructivism

**IS THERE A CONFLICT BETWEEN LITERATURE
AND JOURNALISM?**

Peer Review editor Lisa R. Lattuca returns, this time with Joe Marren, looking for a constructivist pedagogy. International perspective frames research from H. Leslie Steeves, Nancy Graham Holm, Mark Deuze, and Tom Kelleher and Michelle O'Malley. From the Graduate Teaching Academy, Paul Mihailidis focuses on Sweden. A David Abrahamson essay on literary journalism. Review editor Don Heider's genre selections include news writing, technology, magazines, law, and women – as journalists, as the subject of journalists, and as the under-represented faculty of journalism education. Editor's Note asks how journalism and mass communication educators can join a national nonpartisan movement to better prepare students for college and career success.

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ESSAY

Educator publishes original essays that provide the basis for a collegial conversation among peers with shared interests in journalism and mass communication education. Contributions should break new ground; offer new perspective; and provide evidence, analyses, and conclusions that contribute to the discipline's scholarly body of knowledge.

Teaching Literary Journalism: A Diverted Pyramid?

DAVID ABRAHAMSON

There is ample evidence that the last decade or so has seen a new emphasis on more writerly forms in journalism. As a result, this is perhaps the appropriate time to re-examine the issue of literary/writerly influences on the construction of journalistic writing: the ways in which the present mirrors similar forms from the past, their status as journalistic genres, and their power to both convey information and inform argument. Most important, it explores the pedagogical ramifications of the phenomenon, addressing the special and somewhat undefined aspects of teaching this kind of journalism.

The title above, "Teaching Literary Journalism: The Diverted Pyramid"—with its reference to literary journalism, the classroom, and a sense of diversion—is predicated on a sense that, at least since the early 1990s, there has been clear trend in the mainstream press away from the formulaic strictures of the inverted pyramid. As with any fairly recent phenomenon, agreed-upon names have yet to be agreed upon. Some call it literary journalism. Or narrative journalism. Or, at the disputed outer boundaries, creative non-fiction.

Similarly, there is some debate about definitions. What a decade ago was quite clearly differentiated in the

minds of both journalists (and perhaps even readers) as hard news and soft news has become decidedly more amorphous. I would, by way of example, be quite comfortable offering as one turning point the 18 January 2000 edition of the *New York Times*, the front page of which carried a story entitled "Doctors Eliminate Wrinkles, and Insurers." Written by Jennifer Steinhauer, it was a 1,500-word article—playful yet penetrating, properly fact-filled yet fearless in the realm of possible social meaning, on the wonders of Botox.¹ Clearly, the rules are changing.

Of all the definitions available, I prefer, for classroom purposes, the con-

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struction of Ron Rosenbaum, certainly one of the craft's foremost contemporary practitioners. Literary journalism, he once wrote, is not about literary flourishes or references, but rather "journalism [which] at its best asks the questions that literature asks."²

There are, of course, a number of possible reasons for why this trend has appeared. As Schlesinger and Kondratieff have argued in other contexts, human institutions often appear to manifest historical cycles.³ In the case of journalism—most certainly one of the more human of institutions—before objective journalism rose to dominance in the early twentieth century, much of the customary trade practices of the journalism of the day could be loosely characterized as literary journalism. In fact, although the term "New Journalism" usually refers to nonfiction writing that emerged in the 1960s, the phrase was actually first used in the 1890s to describe a contemporary journalistic trend foregrounding evocative narrative detail. Stephen Crane was its most prominent practitioner.⁴

More, recently, looking back at the New Journalism of the 1960s, Tom Wolfe made the argument in his seminal "The Feature Game" essay, that one of the aspects of forms of journalism is their need to capture new realities of the moment, and he argued that the New Journalism of the period existed because of the social ferment of the 1960s — and that conventional journalism no longer was the best vehicle to capture the tumult of the era.⁵ Following that logic, one could certainly argue that the new realities of the last fifteen years are also uniquely fitting subject for literary journalism.

Another factor it might be unwise to discount is the role of competition,

particularly from other, often nontraditional media. The argument here is grounded in a range of economic considerations: audience satisfaction, circulation numbers, advertising rates, and ultimately profit figures and stock price. The fact that the nontraditional media are successfully using more literary narrative forms has not gone unnoticed. As a result, some conventional news organizations, in response to competitive pressures, have been more willing to experiment.⁶

Yet another factor worth examining may lie in the realm of personal preferences. First, there is the "bottom-up" variety. As Wolfe argued in "Like a Novel," a companion essay to "The Feature Game," since the early 1960s a set of personal aspirations has informed the writing of some reporters.⁷ Largely as a matter of personal preference, they have chosen to explore more "writerly" approaches, attempting to move beyond what they consider the constraints of conventionally objective journalism. Similarly, there has been a "top-down" impetus, a belief on the part of some contemporary newspaper editors that new forms of writing are called for. One of the best examples can be found at the *New York Times*, where A. M. Rosenthal retired as executive editor and was replaced by Max Frankel in 1986.⁸ From that point forward, including the 1994-2001 executive editorship of Joseph Lelyveld, a nonfiction author of some note,⁹ most observers have noticed marked changes at the paper, including a broader definition of news and encouragement for more varied forms of news-writing.

It is important to note that changes like these—in effect, changes in what a given institution tends to value—can

often lead to changes in organizational culture. For example, from a reporter's perspective, it is possible that there are career advantages to becoming an adept practitioner of literary journalism. In the competitive newsroom environment, having one's work noticed both by peers and management and/or being applauded by readers leads to promotions and job offers from more prominent newspapers. As Jennifer 8. Lee, a rising star at the *New York Times*, recently said: "For everything you write...always leave your mark with flair. Put that extra effort in. Editors will notice and appreciate it."¹⁰ This careerist aspect is obviously terribly important to our students because it might have a bearing on who gets the best jobs, which leads to the heart of my topic today, which is to offer a few observations on the teaching of literary journalism.

Before I begin, a confession: Most of the half-dozen or so points that I will make are probably not truly original with me. Most are the products of class discussions in literary journalism classes I've taught since the early 1990s. And, no surprise, a fair number probably occurred to me only after being first brought up by a student, for which I am eternally grateful.

I have found that in teaching literary journalism, the class discourse often veers away from the "how" of literary journalism. Instead, we often spend a fair amount of time considering the "why" of literary journalism. By this, I mean students want to explore where literary journalism fits in with the more conventional practices of the profession. They want to discuss the motivation and career paths of past practitioners. They are looking, I think, for reasons to attempt something which

most of them find difficult, perhaps even scary. What follows are the answers to these "why" questions about literary journalism my students and I have devised.

First is the issue of timelessness versus yesterday's news. In today's 24-second news cycle, there seems to be an appetite in students for, if not for exactly, immortality (they are not that delusional), at least a longer shelf life for the product they have worked so hard to produce. Because they are encouraged to put so much energy and care into it, they are less than charmed by journalism's ephemerality—the proverbial birdcage liner. This may not have been true of previous generations of journalists, but it does seem to be a characteristic of many young journalists today. Obviously the speed of the news cycle is a large factor here, and it has been greatly influenced by the impact of technology. And it is part of a larger cultural consideration, what might be called "the culture of the micro-moment," where time itself has been compressed. Not only is nothing forever; nothing is hardly any time at all. It is an instantly disposable view of the universe. Something new always awaits. Simply hit the "refresh" button and something else will be there. I think I see a resistance on the part of students to this.

There is also the issue of the individual versus the institution, or in the argot of the 1960s, "the individual versus the system." Students seem to often resist the kind of careerist, get-a-job worldview of which they are so often accused. Generations Y and Z are often accused of a reflexive opportunism, but I see resistance on the part of many. One of the attractions of literary journalism is that it offers an opportu-

nity to do deeply personal work. Even without using the first person, it offers a way to report and write about unconventional and under-reported topics that they think are important or interesting.

Thirdly, it never ceases to amaze me how passionately most students—either explicitly or beneath a thin veneer of cool—want to excel. In journalism education, we often privilege reporting, sometimes at the expense of writing, or at least any writing beyond the fairly conventional formulas of objective news reporting. Literary journalism offers, I suspect, a new arena, an aesthetic one, in which students can experience improvement. With role models such as Dorothy Thompson, Orwell, and Hemmingway, to name a random few, students certainly have ample inspiration. And when offered a chance to do something they regard as unique and special, I am often delighted by how eager they are to take advantage of it. It can be argued that in journalism education our primary objective is socialization — in effect, the passing along of the specifics of professional practice, the customs, myths, and legends of the tribe. An appetite to go beyond that seems to be one of the things that literary journalism allows students to respond to.

And there is a related consideration. We do not often speak of this, but teaching literary journalism seems to inevitably bring up the “trade versus profession” conversation about journalism itself. The less attractive trade aspects—lower status, less personal empowerment, etc.—are often noted disapprovingly by students as they contemplate their pending working lives. Instead, they very much want to think of journalism as a profession,

and I sense the existence of literary journalism helps them do so. For even though I am a devout believer that craft is the absolutely mandatory foundation of art, the presence of higher aesthetic or artistic standards of writing embedded in literary journalism contribute to the claims of journalism as a whole to the status of the profession.

In closing, one last observation which teaching literary journalism has taught both me and, I hope, my students: there is no inherent conflict between fact and story. The sacred inverted pyramid may have become somewhat diverted, but its factual imperatives remain. There are, however, not only different forms of truth but also many different ways to communicate the truth. Since before the invention of writing, “story” and “narrative” have quite admirably served that purpose. And for the reasons outlined above, I and, again I hope, my students see cause to celebrate the claim of what we call literary journalism to the realm of legitimate professional practice.

Endnotes

1. Jennifer Steinhauer, “Doctors Eliminate Wrinkles, and Insurers,” *New York Times*, 18 January 2000, sec. A, p. 1.

2. Ron Rosenbaum, interview with Tim Cavanaugh, *Feed Magazine*, <http://www.feedmag.com/re/re196_master2.html>.

3. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), and Nikolas D. Kondratieff, *The Long Wave Cycle*, trans. Guy Daniels (New York:

Richardson and Snyder, 1984).

4. Michael Robertson, *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

5. Tom Wolfe, "The Feature Game," in *The New Journalism*, ed. Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

6. An interesting view of the role of economic forces in journalism can be found in Belinda Clarke, "A Lesson in Op-Ed: Gail Collins of the New York Times Visits Medill," <http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/medill/inside/news/a_lesson_in_oped_gail_collins_of_the_new_york_times_visits_medill.html>.

7. Tom Wolfe, "Like a Novel," in *The New Journalism*, ed. Tom Wolfe

and E.W. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

8. Frankel's considered views on the subject can be found in his memoirs: Max Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1999).

9. Perhaps Joseph Lelyveld's best-known book is his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Move Your Shadow* (New York: Crown, 1985), a work about South Africa which won praise from *Publishers Weekly* in terms not typically applied to journalism. The magazine called it "a book of power and compassion."

10. Jennifer 8. Lee, interview by author, 21 November 2005, Evanston, IL.

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